

Saul Bellow and Imagination

Young-Moo Kim

Dept. of English, Seoul Nat'l Univ.

But let us look at one of the dominant ideas of the century, accepted by many modern artists—the idea that humankind has reached a terminal point. We find this terminal assumption in writers like Joyce, Celine, Thomas Mann. In *Doctor Faustus* politics and art are joined in the destruction of civilization. Now here is an idea, found in some of the greatest novelists of the twentieth century. How good is this idea? Frightful things have happened, but is the apocalyptic interpretation true? The terminations did not fully terminate. Civilization is still here. The prophecies have not been borne out. Novelists are wrong to put an interpretation of history as the base of artistic creation—to speak “the last word.” It is better that the novelist should trust his own sense of life. Less ambitious. More likely to tell the truth.¹⁾

As this quotation indicates clearly, Saul Bellow (1915~) definitely rejects the modernist's common assumption that “humankind has reached a terminal point.” He insists that however dismal and bleak the contemporary situation may be, the novelist cannot and should not give the “apocalyptic interpretation” of human history. Indeed, there are misery and wretchedness; the ultimate nihilistic belief beckons the novelist. But it is a temptation which should be overcome. Declaration of “the last word,” that man is finished, is a reckless exaggeration. It is “misrepresenting ourselves to ourselves.”²⁾ One of the surest ways to tell the truth probably lies in the realization that man is neither so great nor so insignificant. The deepest truth is to be found in the correct understanding of “being human.” Bellow urges the novelist to cast away “a conventional unearned wretchedness, a bitterness about existence which is mere fashion.”³⁾ The novelist should “trust his own sense of life.” This is the fundamental position of Bellow the novelist.

One of Bellow's central aims in fiction is to repudiate nihilism and the cult of isolation. Bellow once said of our situation in modern literature that “we are threatened by nudity,

1) Gordon Lloyd Harper, “Saul Bellow” (an interview), in *Saul Bellow: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Earl Rovit (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1975), p. 18.

2) Saul Bellow, “The Sealed Treasure,” *The Times Literary Supplement*, Friday, 1 July 1960, p. 414.

3) *Ibid.*

barrenness, weightlessness, and non-existence-in-existence."⁴⁾ The Bellow protagonists from Joseph and Asa Leventhal through Augie, Tommy, and Henderson to Herzog, Sammler, and Citrine seek for accommodation or community instead of alienation. Dangling man's acceptance of the world, his rejection of isolated freedom (i.e., "narcotic dullness") comes from his realization that it is "the sorest evil, the heaviest disease to regard life as a loathsome burden."⁵⁾ Life is not at all a loathsome burden; we should not stand away from life "as from a leprosy."⁶⁾ Common everyday ordinary existence, "the changes of the day and night, of the seasons, of flowers and fruits, and all other recurring pleasures that come to us, that we may and should enjoy them—these are the mainsprings of our earthly life" (*DM*, p. 13). Augie March's belief in the "axial lines of life" represents the revaluation of this common possibility which is the major structure of experience in Bellow's novelistic world. Bellow speaks of Mr. Sammler: "even if [he has been] insulted, pained, somewhere bleeding, [he is] not broadly expressing any anger, not crying out with sadness, but translating heartache into delicate, even piercing observation" (*SP*, p. 44). Sammler, a survivor of Holocaust, shows a vision of human community and the possibility of a decent life, but in spite of human suffering and wretchedness, not because of them. In an article on contemporary fiction, Bellow quotes Simone Weil: "To believe in the existence of human beings as such is love," and adds that "this is what makes the difference."⁷⁾

This affirmation of human life leads to another important theme in Bellow—the folly of the common tendency to intellectualize about everything, even life itself. Herzog comes to realize the "impossibility of arriving at a synthesis" that can meet this foolish demand. Bellow says of Herzog:

I think a good deal of *Herzog* can be explained simply by the implicit assumption that existence, quite apart from any of our judgments, has value, that existence is worth-ful. . . . It [the book] simply points to the comic impossibility of arriving at a synthesis that can satisfy modern demands. . . . To me, a significant theme of *Herzog* is the imprisonment of the individual in a shameful and

4) Saul Bellow, "Skepticism and the Depth of Life," *The Arts and the Public* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1967), p. 28.

5) Saul Bellow, *Dangling Man* (New York: Signet Books, 1965), p. 13. I refer to these editions from now on: *Dangling Man* - *DM*; *Henderson the Rain King* (New York: Popular Library, 1963) - *HRK*; *Herzog* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1965) - *H*; *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1979) - *SP*; *Humboldt's Gift* (New York: Avon Books, 1976) - *HG*; *To Jerusalem and Back* (New York: Viking, 1976) - *TJAB*.

6) D. H. Lawrence, *Phoenix* (New York: Viking, 1936), p. 312. Lawrence once said of Flaubert that Flaubert "stood away from life as a leprosy."

7) Saul Bellow, "Distractions of a Fiction Writer," *New World Writing* (12), 1957, p. 247.

impotent privacy. He feels humiliated by it; he struggles comically with it; and he comes to realize at last that what he considered his intellectual "privilege" has proved to be another form of bondage. Anyone who misses this misses the point of the book.⁸⁾

Herzog attempts to grasp reality with language. "Perhaps I'd like to change it all into language, to force Madeleine and Gersbach to have a *Conscience*. There's a word for you. I must be trying to keep tight the tensions without which human beings can no longer be called human. . . . And I've filled the world with letters to prevent their escape" (*H*, p. 25). In his letters he turns everywhere to attack, mock, repudiate, question, chide, and expose. The President of the United States, Martin Heidegger, Adlai Stevenson, Police Commissioner Wilson, Spengler, Lawyer, Psychiatrist, etc. fall a prey to Herzog. But at the same time he admires Nehru and Dr. King. He makes an apology for leaving Ramona. "Indeed, Herzog's attempt to 'keep tight the tensions' while attacking injustice and irrationality is, like Henderson's assault on reality, an affirmation and evocation of pluralism—the separateness and the diverse energies of others."⁹⁾ And this is a peculiar affirmation of human individuality like that of Rainer Maria Rilke:

A togetherness between two people is an impossibility. . . . But once the realisation is accepted that even between the *closest* human beings infinite distance continues to exist, a wonderful living side by side can grow up, if they succeed in loving the distance between them.¹⁰⁾

At the end of *Herzog* this kind of realization gives Herzog a significant inner happiness: "Something produces intensity, a holy feeling, as oranges produce orange, as grass green, as birds heat" (*H*, p. 340). This happiness is also a happiness coming from his realization that life cannot be captured by any neat intellectual system. In *To Jerusalem And Back* Bellow once again invites our attention to the futility of intellectualization. He admits that our effort to grasp reality by intellectual means is not *always* wrong. However we must not forget, he says, that "history and politics are not at all like the notions developed by intelligent, informed people" (*TJAB*, p. 8).

Human intellect is not sufficient for our full understanding of human mystery. Bellow argues that "modern writers sin when they suppose that they *know*, as they conceive that physics *knows* or that history *knows*. The subject of the novelist is not knowable in any

8) Earl Rovit, pp. 15~16.

9) Richard Pearce, "The Ambiguous Assault of Henderson Herzog," in Earl Rovit (1975), p. 76.

10) R.M. Rilke, *Letters*, I, p. 57 quoted in Frank Wood, *Rainer Maria Rilke: The Rings of Forms* (New York: Octagon Books, 1970), p. 108.

such way. The mystery [of mankind] increases."¹¹ If our rational penetration collapses in the face of human mystery, what will be the alternative? Here, *Dangling Man*, Bellow's seminal work, once again serves as a good point of departure.

Joseph puts great importance on logic and reason. "The last seven or eight years he has worked everything out in accordance with a general plan" (*DM*, p. 20). He is a "creature of plans." He has a strong faith in reason, a faith in the adequacy of his own mind in understanding his identity. But after the Servatius party, Joseph realizes that the plans "led him to be untrue to himself. He made mistakes of the sort people make who see things as they wish to see them, or for the sake of their plans, *must* see them" (*DM*, p. 27). He comes to recognize that reason is self-defeating; for even if the rational plan is "to implement a philosophy of brotherhood. . . . the method, 'intellection,' is finally destructive of the possibility of success."¹²

"Well, the party turned into a terrible mess, didn't it?"

"Yes," I agreed.

"Do you ever wonder what's the matter with these people?"

"I've been wondering," I said. "What do you think?" . . .

"You're all fenced around. It took me some time to find out you weren't such a bad guy. At first I thought you wanted people to come up and sniff you, as if you were a tree. . . . You people all seem satisfied to settle down to a long life of taking in each other's laundry. Everybody else is shut out. It's offensive to people like me."

"What makes you come around then?" I said.

"I don't know," said Brill. "I guess it interests me to watch you carry on."

"Oh, I see."

"You asked."

"It's perfectly all right. So long Jack." I offered my hand; after a moment of surprise (perhaps it was an ironic surprise), he took it (*DM*, p. 37).

In this pivotal scene at the Servatius party Joseph readily recognizes the cogency of Jack Brill's comment and its relevance to his own dilemma. So he gives his hand to Jack. This recognition is a sudden, almost epiphanic insight, not rationally, but spontaneously earned. After much oscillation between his faith in reason and rejection of it, Joseph once again withdraws his belief in all the "logical constructions," except the most important and ironic one—

11) Saul Bellow, "Some Notes on Recent American Fiction," *Encounter*, 21 November 1963, 29.

12) Joseph Biam, "Escape From Intellect: Saul Bellow's *Dangling Man*," *The University Review*, 37 (October 1970), 31.

his belief that surrender to intuition must itself be justifiable in rational terms. The paradox is obvious. This is what Alan Watts calls the "doublebind": the more our intellect informs us of its limitations—that is, the more "truth" it teaches us—the more difficult it becomes to act on the truth and to surrender our faith in intellection. The self is its own jailer and prevents the discovery of the "blessedness of unreason."¹³⁾

Eugene Henderson gets to a similar recognition after many complications. From the start he feels a strong desire for redemption. "I want, I want" is his habitual cry, a cry with no object. He tries his hand at pig farming in a Connecticut suburb. But the enmity of his status-conscious neighbors frustrates his first adventure. He thinks music will redeem him, but his violin only produces a "noise [that] is like smashing egg crates" (*HRK*, p. 28). At last, he flies to Africa, the "ancient bed of mankind." With his African friend, Romilayu, Henderson walks to the land of the Arnewi, "an original place... older than the city of Ur" (*HRK*, p. 41). The Arnewi admire Henderson's vitality. To meet their expectations and to return their affection for him, he attempts to exterminate the frogs by fabricating a makeshift bomb. This is a manifestation of his belief in rational reasoning and technology. But his technological intelligence proves disastrous. The bomb blows out the dam as well as the frogs. He is forced to leave the Arnewi forever. His redemption is incomplete.

Now Henderson arrives at the land of Wariri. Here he learns that technology has two sides, positive and negative, and that he will have to give up both sides if he is to get a redemption, i. e., to become a natural man. The Wariri teaches him the ways of primitive natural man. He bites a Wariri biscuit only to break his acrylic bridge which was put in by a skilled New York dentist: modern technology falls down in the face of the natural. After this introduction to physical pain, Henderson undergoes a more important test in death. A corpse is offered as his roommate. The corpse is a real *memento mori*. Henderson becomes to understand the real meaning of death: "Here, man, is your being, which you think so terrible" (*HRK*, p. 104).

The Wariri believe that if anyone moves a huge wooden statue of Mummah, the goddess of cloud, rain will fall. Turombo tries first to move her in vain. Henderson, a well-fed ex-Captain in the U. S. Army, is the only one man with sufficient energy to move the statue. With King Dahfu's permission, he comes to the goddess.

Never hesitating, I encircled Mummah with my arms. I wasn't to going to take no for an

13) *Ibid.*, 33.

answer. I pressed my belly upon her, and sank my knees somewhat. She smelled like a living old woman. Indeed, to me she was a living personality, not an idol. We met as challenged and challenger, but also as intimates. And with the close pleasure you experience in a dream or on one of those warm beneficial floating idle days when every desire is satisfied, I laid my cheek against her wooden bosom. I cranked down my knees and said to her, "Up you go, dearest. No use trying to make yourself heavier; if you weighed twice as much I'd lift you anyway." The wood gave to my pressure and benevolent Mummah with her fixed smile yielded to me; I lifted her from the ground and carried her twenty feet to her new place among the other gods. . . .

After this feat of strength, when the sky began to fill with clouds, I was not so surprised as I might have been. From under my brows I noted their arrival. I was inclined to take it as my due (HRK, pp. 171-72).

This scene shows that Henderson's approach to Mummah is not intellectual. He performs this brilliant feat, not by employing some rational means, but by accepting a mystical religion. For him the idol is not a mere idol; it is a living personality. "She smelled like a living old woman." He lays his cheek against her bosom and whispers with tenderness: "Up you go, dearest. No use trying to make yourself heavier." This is not an attitude of the so-called "civilized" man. It has nothing to do with a complacent confidence in man's intellect to conquer nature. Henderson's exploit does make rain fall, but this millionaire from America is not surprised at all. He accepts the downpour of rain as his "due." By becoming more open and understanding to forces that cannot be explained or analyzed by reason, Henderson is becoming a more natural man.¹⁴⁾

From Dahfu, Henderson learns much about mysteries of life, death, personality, and love. The essence of Dahfu's teaching is self-transcendence. The African king says to Henderson, "the tendency of your consciousness is to isolate self" (HRK, p. 236). Henderson cannot admire the "beauty" of the lioness Atti. Why? Because of fear, Dahfu says. "When the fear yields, a beauty is disclosed in its place. This is also said of perfect love if I recollect, and it means that ego-emphasis is removed" (HRK, p. 232). And the first step to the removal of ego-emphasis is our realization that "you are related to all" (HRK, p. 235). This realization itself comes from "a force of nature"—imagination. "Imagination, imagination, imagination! —It sustains, it alters, it redeems" (HRK, p. 240). In *Humboldt's Gift* Citrine comes to realize the true message of his friend's poem on mice, hawk, and lion and says: "The imagination must not pine away—that was Humboldt's message. It must assert again that art manifests the inner powers of nature" (HG, pp. 107~08). He declares that

14) Bruce J. Borrus, "Bellow's Critique of the Intellect," *Modern Fiction Studies*, 25 (Spring 1979), 34~35.

imagination is the "savior-faculty."

In one of his recent articles on modern culture and literature, after pointing out the inadequateness of intellectual discursive reasoning, Bellow emphasizes the importance of imagination :

The German philosopher Joseph Pieper speaks in one of his essays (*Leisure, the Basis of Culture*) of a purely receptive attitude of mind in which we become aware of immaterial reality. . . . According to Kant, Pieper continues, knowledge is exclusively discursive, the opposite of receptive and contemplative. To Kant knowledge was an activity. Any other claim to know was not genuine because it involved no work. In Pieper's own words, "The Greek—Aristotle no less than Plato—as well as the great medieval thinkers, held that not only physical, sensuous perception but equally man's spiritual and intellectual knowledge included an element of pure receptive contemplation or, as Heraclitus says, of listening to the 'essence of things.'" Am I proposing, then, that we should take refuge from modern crisis and noise in a contemplative life? Such a thing is unthinkable. I am saying, rather, that there is a mode of knowledge different from the ruling mode. That this other mode is continually operative—the imagination assumes that things will deliver something of their essence to the mind that has prepared itself and that knows how to listen.¹⁵

Here "imagination" is equated with "pure receptive contemplation" or with "listening to the essence of things." Authenticity of vision is given to a kind of mystical mode of knowledge. Indeed, Bellow's recent novels signal that he cautiously tries to feel his way with a cane of imagination or intuitive mode of knowledge. Mr. Sammler reads Meister Eckhart, and Charlie Citrine is absorbed in Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophy.

The essence of the imaginative mode is that knowledge of God and of real truth may be obtained through meditation or spiritual insight, that is, through Heraclitean listening to the essence of things. But as human beings with body as well as soul, we should act, should do something; total inactivity is out of question. Therefore, what sort of relationships are there between action and contemplation (or meditation) in this peculiar mode of understanding? What is the practical ethic of "listening to the essence of things"? Arthur C. Danto's classical analysis of the discipline of action in mysticism is illuminating in this context.

Imaginative or intuitive understanding of human things divides human action into two different categories: one is action which values its fruits, and the other is one which abandons its fruits. And the latter is closely related to imaginative understanding of truth, i. e., redemption. *Bhagavad Gita* urges: "On action alone be thy interest / Never on its fruits; /

15) Saul Bellow, "A World Too Much With Us," *Critical Inquiry*, 2 (Autumn 1975), 8.

Let not the fruits of action be thy motive, / Nor be thy attachment to inaction."¹⁶⁾ Therefore, what is important is to detach oneself from one's action; what matters is not negation of action or attachment to inaction, but detached action. This teaching, according to Danto, "would allow, for example, a baker answering 'Why are you putting that yeast in with the flour?' with 'In order that the dough will rise,' but not 'Why are you baking that cake?' with 'In order to win the blue ribbon.' What the *Gita* wants is that the baker should bake cakes without caring whether or not they win blue ribbons, but one could not bake cakes not caring whether they rise or not." In other words, the *Gita* teaches us to behave disinterestedly, "not to have motives for one does, but only to do what one does because that is the way to do what it is one's nature to do."¹⁷⁾ This mode of action is exactly what we find in many of Bellow's characters.

If we ask Joseph, Asa, Augie, Tommy, Henderson, and Citrine, "Why are you doing that particular thing?" their answer will be more or less like this: "I am a man and this is what men do." That is to say, if I am Joseph, my obligation is to fulfill "Joseph-hood," but I have no motives over and above this for doing what I do. In *Humboldt's Gift*, after realizing the folly of his fruit-conscious action, Citrine resolves to listen to the voice of his own soul and to "the sound of the truth that God puts into us" (*HG*, p. 461). He "begins simply to live." And perhaps this may constitute one answer to the question, "How should a good man live; what ought he to do?"

When Bellow argues that "the artist, as Collingwood tells us, must be a prophet,...[that] art is the community's medicine for the worst disease of mind, the corruption of consciousness,"¹⁸⁾ and that "moral function cannot be divorced from art,"¹⁹⁾ he means that in order to overcome or cure the corruption of consciousness (ego-emphasis), the artist, through his work of art, the product of imagination, should show and prove the validity of "detached action" and the importance of listening to the essence of things. In *Mr. Sammler's Planet* Sammler prays over the body of his nephew, Elya Gruner.

Remember, God, the soul of Elya Gruner, who, as willingly as possible and as well as he was able, and even to an intolerable point, and even in suffocation and even as death was coming, was eager, even childishly perhaps (may I be forgiven for this), even with a certain servility, to do

16) Requoted from A. C. Danto's *Mysticism and Morality* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1972), p. 90.

17) *Ibid.*, p. 91.

18) Saul Bellow, "Culture Now: Some Animadversions, Some Laughs," *Modern Occasions*, I, 1970 / 71, 178.

19) Saul Bellow, "The Writer as Moralist," *The Atlantic Monthly* (March 1963), 62.

what was required of him. At his best this man was much kinder than I at my very best have ever been or could ever be. He was aware that he must meet, and he did meet—through all the confusion and degraded clowning of this life through which we are speeding—he did meet the terms of his contract. The terms which, in his inmost heart, each man knows. As I know mine. As all know. For that is the truth of it—that we all know. God, that we know, we know, we know (*SP*, pp. 285-86).

What Sammler is suggesting here is that his nephew "did meet the terms of his contract, the terms which, in his inmost heart, each man knows," by giving his ear to his inmost heart. Gruner just fulfilled "Gruner-hood." This fulfillment is a result of his "detached action" and at the same time it is a recovery of his true nature—internal greenness which has already been there but was distorted and clouded by our ego-emphasis.

As everybody knows, Saul Bellow is one of the most serious writers in contemporary America. He has also been an extremely successful novelist in his achievement and popularity. His sincerity, seriousness, and strong sense of mission have always impressed us deeply. But we cannot shrug off a feeling of something missing or unsatisfactory in every Bellow novel. And it is very important to identify from where this feeling comes. More than anything else, it seems to come from the very nature of Bellow's novels and his vision of reality. As we have discussed, his vision is related to the imaginative mode of understanding.²⁰ Bellow shares this vision and other characteristics with many contemporary American writers, especially with the new poets.

Indeed, his approach to the human reality and mystery is strikingly similar to that of some contemporary poets. (If literature is to reflect, in one way or other, the society in which it is produced, this similarity probably comes from the very characteristics of the prevalent ethos of contemporary America.) Bellow and many contemporary poets regard the artist as a kind of prophet or bard. Bellow says that "the artist, as Collingwood tells us, must be a prophet, 'not in the sense that he foretells things to come, but that he tells the audience, at the risk of their displeasure, the secrets of their own hearts.' That is why he exists. He is spokesman of his community."²¹ Bellow and the new poets are writers without "masks." Unlike most modernist writers, the new writers are intensely personal, honest, emotional, and moralistic. Sometimes extensive biographical knowledge is essential for a full understanding of their novels and poems. Bellow agrees with the contemporary poets that the constructive function of politics, society, and technology is at best questionable. This

20) "A World Too Much..." 7.

21) "A Culture Now," 178.

tendency is responsible for strangely static quality of contemporary poetry and the Bellow novel, at least at the conclusion of the novel. These new writers have a strong belief in their instinctive individual self and imaginative power. They have lost their predecessors' conviction in the rule of reason and intellect. This strong affirmation of imagination sometimes results in the internalization of human reality.²²⁾ Consider, for example, James Wright's short poem, "The Jewel":

There is this cave
In the air behind my body
That nobody is going to touch:
A cloister, a silence
Closing around a blossom of fire.
When I stand upright in the wind,
My bones to dark emeralds.²³⁾

The cave in the first line is a kind of sacred place within the self. The language of the poem insists on enclosure and interiority. The word "cloister" has a religious connotation. The title "The Jewel" is related not only to the sacred mental space, mysterious and silent, but also to the emerald bones of the last line. This interior sacredness extends to the body as well as mind. (Here we recognize the unmistakable similarity to Bellow's interior greenness.)²⁴⁾ This intuitive understanding of reality, listening to the essence of things is particularly conspicuous in W. S. Merwin, Gary Snyder, Galway Kinnell, and James Wright. Their journeys inward and downward usually end in the encounter with a presence, sacred and mysterious, inhabiting the utmost bottom of self.²⁵⁾ Meeting the ever-present

22) Paul Breslin, "How to Read the New Contemporary Poem," *The American Scholar* (Summer 1978), 357~70. I am much indebted in the discussion of the contemporary poetry to this excellent article.

23) A. Poulin Jr. ed., *Contemporary American Poetry*, 2nd edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1975), p. 410.

24) Frederick R. Karl observes that Bellow "went from openness toward tunneling, closing down rather than expanding-- *Handerson the Rain King* is the sole exception here. Just as much Augie March seems to come from streets and open areas from something as big as Chicago itself, or from the vast mountains and plains of Mexico, from the air surrounding the American bald eagle--so in the later novels experience derives from caves and grottoes, tombs, isolated houses, stuffy rooms, even beds." See *American Fictions 1940~1980: A Comprehensive History and Critical Evaluation* (New York: Harper and Row, 1983), p. 145.

25) For example, in the following two poems everything happens also not in outward reality. What the poems register is related to interiority, imaginative space: "the silent zones / of the brain," "a voice / spectral, calling you," the life forgotten "among the buried windows," "night between the deserts."

I used to come to you
and sit by you

presence is, in Mr. Sammler's terms, "the terms which, in his inmost heart, each man knows."

and sing to you. You did not know,
 and yet you will remember,
 in the silent zones
 of the brain, a specter, descendant
 of the ghostly forefathers, singing
 to you in the nighttime--
 not the songs
 of light said to wave
 through the bright hair of angels,
 but a blacker
 rasping flowering on that tongue.
 For when the Maud moon
 glimmered in those first nights,
 and the Archer lay
 sucking the icy biestings of the cosmos,
 in his crib of stars,

I had crept down

.....

may there come back to you
 a voice,
 spectral, calling you
sister!
 from everything that dies.

(from "Under the Maud Moon" by Galway Kinnell)

Naturally it is night.
 Under the overturned lute with its
 One string I am going my way
 Which has a strange sound.

This way the dust, that way the dust.
 I listen to both sides
 But I keep right on.
 I remember the leaves sitting in judgment
 And then winter.

I remember the rain with its bundle of roads.
 The rain taking all its roads.
 Nowhere.

Young as I am, old as I am,

I forget tomorrow, the blind man.
 I forget the life among the buried windows.
 The eyes in the curtains.
 The wall
 Growing through the immortelles.
 I forget silence
 The owner of the smile.

This must be what I wanted to be doing,
 Walking at night between the two deserts,
 Singing.

("Air" by W. S. Merwin)

This tendency toward imaginative vision that we have identified in Bellow and many contemporary poets inevitably emphasizes the spiritual or psychological aspect of human dynamics. For Bellow, the internal conditions are very important, because the external conditions which exist in society now, are but the manifestation of inherited internal conditions in the human beings who comprise it. Apparently he is right. On second thought, however, the internal and external conditions are closely related; they do not exist independently. Any significant change, internal or external, can take place only by the simultaneous innovation of both. The exclusive emphasis on the importance of individual imagination can be misleading. It is an unbalanced vision.

Of course we are not saying that contemporary poets and Bellow have entirely neglected social and economic reality. Many of the poets have a strong sense of mission that can drive them to vehement outrage against all sorts of man's inhumanity to man including war. And Bellow's novels are deeply rooted in the complicated societal structure of modern American urban life. However, in Bellow, the matters stemming from concrete multi-dimensional social and human reality almost always give way to spiritual and psychological solutions.²⁶⁾ They always change into matters of ethical determination or "free choice."²⁷⁾ Or perhaps better put, Bellow understands the problem of social inequality, for instance, as a question of whether we should give up or retain our already-earned privileges.

In his article, "A World Too Much with Us" (1975), Bellow has emphasized the importance of the individual's independent judgment, of the individual's imaginative understanding of phenomena, and of the recovery of significant space by the individual—"a space in which they [external events] can be received on decent terms." (Once again we notice the similarity between the significant space and the cave in "The Jewel." And he argues that "if there is no significant space, there is no judgment, no freedom, we determine nothing for

26) F.R. Karl sees Bellow caught between alternatives: "on the one hand, the enclosed, labyrinthine nature of his imagination, which includes the type of inward-turning protagonist he feels most comfortable with, the shaping of tunneling narratives, and memory-laden imagery and scenery, all of which finds parallels in Proust, Kafka, and Beckett. On the other hand, Bellow intellectually and in comic method has rejected this of narcissistic flirtation with consciousness as neurotic and counterproductive to good fiction and to a good life. Bellow's ideas... indicate a need to locate man in a community, a society, even a world, certainly to have him respond to phenomena outside the circuitry of his own self-reflected image.... Contrary to the absolutism of enclosed man, Bellow man must seek order in himself.... This tension between the passivity of the buried protagonist and the authorial need to make him react to vibrant externals Bellow never satisfactorily resolves. It haunts *Herzog*, and it splits *Sammler*. It will prove equally unresolvable in *Humboldt's Gift*." See *American Fictions 1940~1980*, pp. 335~36.

27) Earl Rovit, p.18.

ourselves individually. The destruction of significant space... leaves us helplessly in the public sphere."²⁸⁾ Indeed, Bellow's novelistic effort is from the start to expand "the introspective space between history and personality."

And it is precisely Bellow's commitment to the fact of their [his heroes'] developed self-awareness that has led him to exploit the introspective space between history and personality—the precious human space in which morality, humor, grace, and creativity may conceivably exist. In fact, the steady current of development from Bellow's earliest work to his latest can be appreciated partially in terms of his painstakingly honest efforts to widen that space between—to present victim-man with valid opportunities to enlarge his human capacities. Augie, Henderson, Herzog, and Sammler are continually victimized, but they are not victims; for want of a better descriptive term, we could call them "survivors."²⁹⁾

Bellow is saying that the destruction of the individual imagination by the distracting social, political, economical events leaves us helplessly in the external condition; therefore, in order to "be free from the public unrest" and to gain our control over the public unrest" and to gain our control over the public sphere, we must recover our independent inner space, individual imaginative vision. But the search for this inner space, "order beyond chaos," is "self-defeating because it places on a spatial metaphor, which has its truth in fantasy and imagination, a burden that is social and psychological. In the latter, the only space that matters is real space, countable and accountable spatiality."³⁰⁾ Indeed, the yearning for the inner space is evasion; it is escaping into imagination and fantasy.

In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard hovers above our theme. He writes about the "hut dream," an archetypal pastoral and spatial ideal, "which is well-known to every one who cherishes the legendary images of primitive houses. But in most hut dreams we hope to live elsewhere, far from the overcrowded house, far from city cares. We flee in search of a real refuge." The contradictions of the hut dream are analogous to the contradictions of the American spatial metaphor. The hut dream involves both an enclosed space which will be a refuge and a space that is far from all other huts. The focus of the dream is an isolated place which is protected, part of a house dream we all carry within us. One thinks of the ranch, the farmhouse, the suburban "fortress," the rural homestead, the archetypal Thoreau cottage at Walden Pond.... It is order beyond chaos, and its quality is frequently measured not by life—but by its distance from real turmoil, the city. Space is evasion.³¹⁾

28) "A World Too Much . . .," 7.

29) Earl Rovit, p. 165.

30) F. R. Karl, p. 41.

31) *Ibid.*, pp. 40~41.